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ABSTRACT

Creating a safe place in which to learn is vital to providing all students with equal opportunity. The Caring Classroom is a model for using adventure techniques to create a classroom community. It begins at the formation stage of group development by addressing cooperation issues such as using put-ups instead of put-downs, using active listening, and being able to work with anyone in the class. Along with ice-breaker activities to facilitate inclusion, a set of ground rules should be established that commit everyone to the physical and emotional safety of each person in the group. Challenge by Choice lets students feel safe in a community by allowing them to control their level of participation within the school structure. Choices about how a certain concept will be learned enable students to best meet their own learning styles. Next, the teacher uses trust building and goal-setting activities to help students explore such issues as making mistakes, trustworthiness, and risk taking, which are vital to creating a safe community. Once they have grappled with cooperation and trust, students can proceed to problem-solving initiatives that help them work through issues of decision making, leadership, and conflict resolution. Finally, a class reaches a point of closeness whereby, with the support of the community, students are ready to begin the learning process without reservation. (TD)

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The Caring Classroom

By Laurie S. Frank

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Remember the presidential debates? You might recall that both major-party candidates stated their view on education, and how they planned to 'reform' the system. The striking thing about both proposals is that there was absolutely nothing new. The same old rhetoric about standards, accountability and testing is being spouted as if the same-old-same-old will create massive changes in our educational system. Today, of course, President Bush and the political establishment are carrying-out their attempts to 'reform' the system, but at what long-term cost?

Education is under the gun in more ways than one. In a literal sense the threat of violence is so pervasive in many of our schools that an atmosphere of paranoia exists. The threat of high-stakes testing has sucked the creativity out of teaching to the point that many districts teach only to the test. The dropout rate is rising while the literacy rate falls.

The bottom line is that real reform must take place if we are to see vibrant learning communities that actually focus on the needs of the children rather than on the needs of the politicians. Creating classroom communities helps students feel connected to each other in a spirit of trust instead of paranoia. They can then learn to resolve conflict peacefully instead of violently. The safety net of the classroom allows students to stop looking over their shoulders every time they make a mistake and, instead, rejoice in a new learning opportunity. They begin to take responsibility and engage in their own learning. They have fun, and you do, too.

Learning is an act of risk taking. Brain research has proven that in order to learn, students must feel safe. Essentially, if someone feels threatened, their brain will not *let* them learn. In a safe environment students can make the mistakes necessary in order to learn from them.

My upcoming book, *The Caring Classroom: Using Adventure to Create Community in the Classroom and Beyond,* describes a process to create a place where all students feel safe to learn. It is a guide for teachers that is packed full of activities, tips and information in order to facilitate the growth of your classroom as a community.

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Students learn what it means to be part of a community by being in one, and grapple with issues like using put ups instead of put downs, making mistakes, practicing leadership, and setting goals.

More than an Adventure

A casual observer watching a group engaged in an activity of Moonball sees only a game involving hitting a beachball. While it is true that the participants are having fun, it is much more than a game. If the observer sticks around long enough she might see the group discuss why certain people are 'hogging' the ball while others never get to touch it. The 'ball hoggers' respond that the others don't seem to want the ball because all they do is stand back waiting for the ball to come to them. This discussion might turn into a larger metaphor for how the students can be more interdependent when working together on class projects -- with those who jump in to do the work sharing the load, and those sitting back becoming more assertive about getting involved.

This moonball scenario is just one small example about how deceiving appearances can be. There is much more to this type of education than playing games. The broad field of Experiential Education, and the specific field of Adventure Education are informed by a plethora of thinkers, theories and philosophies.

The thinkers include John Dewey and Kurt Hahn, both proponents of progressive education during the early part of the 20th century. Dewey believed that education was a process that could not be isolated from a student's experience. He maintained that education consists of a continuity of developing experiences, where students interact with their environment and gain insight and understanding from those experiences.

Kurt Hahn is best known as the guiding spirit behind the Outward Bound movement. He was also a founder of progressive schools in Germany, and saw his techniques used quite effectively by the Nazi regime to teach the Hitler Youth. The experience of seeing his methods used for destructive purposes caused him to conclude that personal goals must be compatible with those of the larger community. These ideas have become a mainstay in the Outward Bound philosophy.

Recently the idea of creating classroom communities has been bolstered by thinkers such as Susan Kovalik's Integrated Thematic Instruction based on brain research and Howard Gardner's theories of Multiple Intelligences. Kovalik offers both a biological and sociological rationale for using experiential techniques in the classroom, and cites eight brain compatible elements: absence of threat, meaningful content, choices, adequate time, enriched environment, collaboration, immediate feedback, and mastery (application). Although many of these elements are addressed during experiential

learning, the absence of threat is a foundation for learning. Creating classroom communities is a powerful way to help students feel safe enough so that they can begin the learning process without reservation.

Gardner proposes a pluralistic view of intelligence that honors a spectrum of styles. Along with the traditional view of intelligence as linguistic and logical-mathematical, he has identified seven other ways to view intelligence: spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic and existential. Adventure and Experiential Education address a variety of these intelligences and thus honors a diversity of learning styles.

How to Create Community

To create a truly safe classroom community through adventure, one is greatly helped by learning about fundamental facilitator knowledge such as group development, sequencing/flow, and the Experiential Learning Cycle. When joined with the general tools of Challenge by choice, Full Value Contract and Goal Setting (first articulated by Project Adventure) a classroom can be transformed into a place that not only supports learning, but accelerates it.

Although there are many variations on the theory of group development, a widely used model was articulated by Tuckman and Jensen. They broke the development process into five phases: Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, Adjourning (Transforming). The idea is that every group goes through a natural process of development and experiences different issues at each stage. At the beginning, people tend to have varying degrees of anxiety, mainly about feeling included. They wonder if people will like them, and are careful about taking risks because the operating norms for the group are not yet established. During this stage, it is necessary to offer activities that help students get to know each other.

Once people get to know each other and feel more comfortable, then they are freer to assert their opinions and take some risks. The Storming and Norming stages are marked by a need for influence. Conflicts can arise around leadership roles and issues of power and control. It is necessary to help students sort through these conflicts to establish operating norms for the class. Activities are chosen to allow students to solve problems together and practice their developing norms.

If students are given an opportunity to talk through issues of influence and create mutually agreed-upon norms, they will naturally move into the Performing stage. Since people now understand how this particular group operates (because they have had a

hand in developing the norms), things just seem to 'click'. Individuals step up to resolve disputes, and everyone feels a connection to the group and to each other.

Adjourning (Transforming) occurs when groups must disband, either because their task is complete, the time period ends, or people get old. Most classrooms have a 10-month lifetime. The endpoint can be a time of grieving, and it is important to offer class members an opportunity to say good-bye, share memories and appreciations with each other.

Group development is a natural process, but can be significantly enhanced through the use of a relevant sequence of activities. There is general agreement in the field of adventure education of a 'hypothetically correct sequence' (see "A Dissertation of Varying the Sequence of Categories of Adventure Activities on the Development of Group Cohesion" by Christian Bisson, 1997). This hypothetically correct sequence includes the following activities:

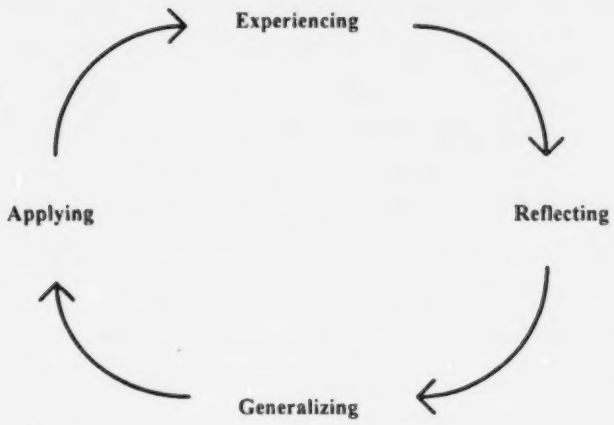
- Ice Breakers/Acquaintance activities
- Deinhibitizer Activities
- Trust/Support Activities
- Problem Solving Initiatives and Low ropes course activities
- Challenge Activities (High Ropes course elements and outdoor pursuits)

Knowing this hypothetically correct sequence and writing down a list of activities to follow it is part of the 'science of sequencing'. It is rather useless, though, if it does not meet the needs of your group. Knowing where your class is in their group development and offering activities that help meet their needs is the 'art of sequencing', also known as the **flow**.

Both Dewey and Hahn were proponents of learning by doing, which is the basis of experiential education. The experience itself, though, is not enough. Without taking the time to reflect upon the experience in order to gain insight, and transfer the insight into the rest of one's life, it is learning in isolation. Hahn stressed the need to reflect upon one's experience in order to gain meaning. Dewey emphasized the need to connect experiences to have an impact upon future learning.

David Kolb articulated this very process in the experiential learning cycle in the mid 1980's. This model is the cornerstone of experiential education whether used in a classroom academic model, in adventure education, during service learning, outdoor education or any of the myriad incarnations of experiential education.

Experiential Learning Cycle



Kolb's four-phase cycle depicts experiences as a string of educational opportunities, rather than as isolated activities. When people have experiences, they take the next step of reflecting upon what has occurred. This reflection time ensures that people have an opportunity to formulate meaning from their experiences. Generalizing is a time to make connections, and look for patterns. Finally, applying the information affords the opportunity to incorporate the learning into their lives, or into the next experience.

Although two-dimensional in this diagram, the experiential learning cycle is a dynamic and fluid model. It has been described as a spiral, in which people move to higher planes of thinking and understanding.

Kolb and others have also taken the experiential learning cycle into the realm of learning styles. Each phase of the cycle plays to different strengths. Some people naturally reflect upon their experiences, others prefer to make connections through research. Some create and test models, while still others seek out experiences so they can learn by trying. The beauty of the cycle is that it meets a variety of needs, while tapping into learning methods that have been around since the dawn of time. As Aldous Huxley so deftly stated, "Experience is not what happens to you; it is what you do with what happens to you."

Community Building Tools: Creating a Safe Environment

Throughout the journey, there are tools that can be used to help a group come together, and then take care of needs along the way. When initiating a community

building process, it is necessary to establish certain ground rules. The ultimate goal is to create an environment where everyone feels physically and emotionally safe. Once a safe atmosphere is achieved, participants are more willing to take risks, such as making mistakes and trying new ideas. The act of risk taking encourages emotional growth and aids in building confidence.

Full Value Contract[*]

Every class consists of individuals who arrived at that point in time in a unique way -- no two people have the exact same history. A person's frame-of-reference dictates how s/he views the world. One person may feel that teasing someone about his hair is humorous, while another views it as cruel. A Full Value Contract is a starting point for a group. It affords group members an opportunity to establish ground rules to which everyone can agree. It can be as simple as a verbal "Play hard, play safe, play fair, have fun", a concept originally developed by the New Games Foundation in the 1970's, or as complicated as a written document that everyone signs.

A Full Value Contract should contain an agreement that everyone is committed to the physical and emotional safety of everyone in the group. There should also be a mechanism for discussing problems as they arise. For example, if a participant throws an object at someone during an activity, or calls someone a name, the members should feel they have the right to stop the activity to call attention to the breach of safety. In the beginning, the teacher may need to model this behavior, acting as a safety expert, until students are more willing to confront the issues themselves.

Another feature of a Full Value Contract is a willingness to work toward group goals, and help others achieve personal goals. In the beginning of a group's life, when the safety parameters are still being set, some students may feel it is necessary to sabotage the group process in order to meet some personal needs. This is known as a hidden agenda. If, as part of the Full Value Contract, participants agree to work toward group goals, they can be asked to bring hidden agendas out into the open. Many times, a group can help satisfy the individual's agenda while meeting group goals. If the individual's agenda runs counter to the group goals, they can be asked to either delay their individual need, or choose to participate in another way. This is known as Challenge by Choice.

Challenge by Choice

The Full Value Contract addresses the group needs, while Challenge by Choice meets individual needs. In order to feel safe in a community, a person must have control over

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[*] Full Value Contract and Challenge by Choice were first articulated by Project Adventure, Inc.

what s/he will and will not do. There are times when it is appropriate to say 'no', even in the face of acute peer pressure. This is especially necessary when asking participants to take risks.

The concept of Challenge by Choice allows each person to be in control of his/her level of participation. It means that a person may choose what s/he wishes to share with the group about him/herself. It means that a person may choose to be totally involved physically and emotionally in an activity, or choose to sit back and watch. It does ***not*** mean that a person sits and reads the newspaper while the group goes about its business. No matter what level of participation an individual chooses, s/he is still part of the group, even if it means being an observer.

Challenge by Choice in action may look like this: During a jump rope activity called 'Turnstile', a participant says he does not want to jump. At first, the students give him some encouragement, and the teacher may ask, "Is there anything we can do to help you to jump?" When he says, 'No, I just don't want to jump', he is offered the rope to act as a rope turner.

In every group situation there are many roles to take. When planning a project, someone might need to make phone contacts, while someone else chooses marketing. Still others create artwork, work on logistics or note taking. If we practice the art of Challenge by Choice in the beginning stages of community building, group members will benefit later, when asked to engage in real life projects.

Challenge by Choice is sometimes difficult to conceptualize in a school setting because students are required to get their work done, be there, and complete a given curriculum. It is helpful to remember that Challenge by Choice is not an on or off switch where students make either-or decisions about participating. Rather, students are given choices within the school structure. Challenge by Choice, then, does **not** ask, "Will you do this?" Instead it asks, "*How* will you do this?" In keeping with the idea of multiple intelligences, choices about how a certain concept will be learned can be offered so that students make choices about how to best meet their own learning styles. During community building activities, Challenge by Choice can range from observing to total involvement.

Depending upon the age and maturity level of the students, they need varying degrees of guidance when considering choices, especially if they have very little experience in making informed choices. A common concern for teachers is a scenario where a student chooses (read 'refuses') to participate, and a whole group of other students follow that lead. This is a perfect teachable moment about choices and how individual choices

affect others. If necessary, you can stop the action for a discussion about choices -- what causes people to make the choices they do, internal and external factors and pressures, how individual and group goals sometimes clash, and what can be done to support people's choices while continuing group process.

As we struggle with the notion of challenge by choice in a school setting, other issues arise. As teachers, we must ask ourselves, "Are students *really* being given a choice?" In our zeal to make sure everyone is included, do we push and prod students into positions where they have no choice? Carla Hacker, elementary school teacher and adventure educator, has labeled this concept 'inclusion by choice'. When students are unable, for physical or emotional reasons, to participate in an activity as it is presented, they can be consulted about how they want to participate. If, for example, the class is involved in a running activity, and a student is on crutches, just handing them a busy chore (like cheering everyone on) can be at best pointless, and at worst demeaning. Ask students how they want to be included, respect that choice, and students are empowered to make real choices. Being included at all costs is not always the best choice for that individual.

Another factor to consider is the need to modify and adapt activities to meet differing levels of physical and cognitive abilities. At the beginning of a group's journey it is the role of the teacher to consider the needs of her class, choose appropriate activities and modify them accordingly. As the class becomes more cohesive and accepting, that responsibility can be shared between all community members as issues of inclusivity arise.

Community Building Model

The Caring Classroom presents a hierarchical model for using adventure techniques to create a classroom community, taking into account group development, sequencing/flow, and the community building tools. It begins with **Cooperation**, addressing issues at the forming stage of group development, such as: using put ups instead of put downs, using active listening and being able to work with anyone in the class. Along with ice breakers and deinhibitizer activities to facilitate inclusion, a full value contract is established and challenge by choice is explored.

The next step is **Trust**. Students work through the issues of making mistakes (is it O.K. in this classroom?), trustworthiness and the idea of risk taking. The teacher reaches into her or his bag of tricks and pulls out trust building and goal setting activities to help students explore these issues so vital to creating a safe community.

Once students have grappled with Cooperation and Trust, they can proceed to **Problem Solving**. This is generally when conflicts really begin to arise and it is time to deal with issues of decision-making, leadership and conflict resolution. Problem solving initiatives are perfect vehicles to help students work through these issues. The resulting process of working through conflicts helps students move though the norming phase of group development and into the performing phase.

Finally, if a class makes it to this point, there is a time of closeness and support of individuals. They are now ready to dive into the **Challenge** step. Every community is not a tight little package that can follow the individuals around for the rest of their lives. The Challenge part of this hierarchy allows students to take on individual challenges *with the support of the community.* They work on issues of stating needs, success/failure and set individual goals. A High ropes course is a wonderful tool at this step. Other activities are outdoor pursuits and presentations or projects.

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In education, time can be our biggest hurdle. We must make choices about what to cover, how to cover it, and what to leave out of a school day. Many times this means focusing on the academic areas of school at the expense of the social and emotional needs of students. The reality, though, is that all of these needs are intertwined. It is vital that we are intentional about creating a safe place in which to learn so that all students have an equal opportunity.

Arthur Wellington Conquest III, a longtime Adventure/Experiential Educator states: "[Adventure] Education is the key ingredient for developing and nurturing our children so they can live productive lives, adapt to today's rapidly changing society and, more importantly, begin to learn how to control the factors which most profoundly affect their destiny...." (*Ziplines, Summer 1996)*

The change process exists inside each and every one of us. It begins with an attitude that sees the possible rather than the unobtainable, that sees potential in every human being, knowing that it is necessary to work, and to work hard. It is truly a *journey toward the caring classroom.*

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